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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effect of classrooms where standard English is spoken on the speech of Black English speaking children. The research analyzed samples of language used by 22 Black English speaking children in seven kindergarten classrooms in three Madison, Wisconsin public schools during one academic year, 1977-78. The following questions were addressed: (1) What phonological and syntactic features constitute Black English in the speech samples? (2) To what extent do the students increase their use of standard English phonological and syntactic forms? (3) What language-climate factors in the classroom, including the presence of standard speaking peers and teacher knowledge of Black English, contribute to the acquisition of standard forms? Tape-recorded samples of the students' speech were obtained, transcribed, and analyzed for five syntactic and four phonological features. Classroom observation notes and teacher interviews were included in the data base. Findings document linguistic change due to what has been called the "Natural informal authority of the speech community." A hierarchy of degree of change in use of features which can be used by teachers to anticipate potential reading problems, and to determine which features to address systematically in the classroom, was established. The roles of various factors contributing to the acquisition of standard English by Black English speakers was focused upon. (Author/MK)

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THE EFFECT OF KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOMS WHERE STANDARD ENGLISH IS SPOKEN ON THE SPEECH OF BLACK ENGLISH - SPEAKING STUDENTS

Paper presented at AERA on April 8, 1980

Boston, Massachusetts

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The Effect of Classrooms Where Standard English is Spoken on the Speech of Black English-Speaking Children

She don talk de way la:k me.

A Black English-speaking kindergarten student made that observation about my speech after talking with me for ten minutes. In September of 1977 she had been in a Madison, Wisconsin public school for two weeks. She had a particularly keen ear for language, and in an informal taping session with one of her friends and me, she touched on a key issue in the research I'm about to describe. Namely, that students who begin school speaking Black English find "school language" or standard English quite different from the dialect they've learned at home. Children in some classrooms learn to code-switch: i.e., to use "She don talk de way la:k me" in some situations and "She doesn't talk the way I do" in others. Socially motivated linguistic change, and specifically standard dialect acquisition in the classroom, is the focal point of this research.

This paper describes the completed first phase of a longitudinal project. This study has been designed to examine the effect of classrooms where the majority of students speak standard English on the speech of Black English-speaking students. It analyzes four phonological and five syntactic features that characterized Black English in the speech samples from twenty-two kindergarten students in seven classrooms during one

academic year. (The features are noted in Section I of the Hand-out). This study documents the change in use of these linguistic features during the year. Finally, it suggests that certain language-climate factors in the classroom contribute to the acquisition or non-acquisition of standard English forms.

Most studies of Black English speakers have been conducted in geographically segregated, linguistically homogenous settings; that is, in large urban areas where the teacher is the only standard English speaker in the classroom. By contrast this study looks at speech patterns in classrooms where most of the students speak standard English and only a few speak Black English. The study, therefore, traces linguistic change due to what has been called the "natural informal authority of the speech community."[1]

Theoretical Framework

Before describing the data collection and analysis, it is important to place this study in a particular context. The theoretical framework for this work is found in the work of dialect geographers, sociolinguists, and educators concerned with dialect diversity in the classroom. The research is descriptive and non-interventionist. Dialect geographers have traditionally been interested in describing the speech of a given region at a particular time.[2] Sociolinguists have focused on the correlation between social variables such as social status, race, age, sex and style on one hand, and linguistic variables on the other. In addition,

they have argued that Black English differs in systemmatic, rule-governed ways from standard English. It is a "different" dialect but in no way "deficient" as some educational psychologists have maintained.[3] Educators interested in dialect diversity in the classroom have called for accurate descriptions of non-mainstream varieties of English. They've advocated increased teacher-awareness of the linguistic validity of Black English. They've argued for recognition of the group reference factor, or peer pressure, in the acquisition of a dialect.[4] These three traditions provide the theoretical framework for this work.

Methodology

The primary data for this study are three tape-recordings for each of twenty-two Black students made in September, February, and May of the academic year 1977-78. The students were asked to watch three eight minute Walt Disney cartoons, one for each of the three taping sessions, and to re-tell the plot in their own words. The films were shown with the sound track turned off to eliminate the influence of the film's language on the re-telling of the plot by the students. The classroom teachers invited the Black English speaking students to "visit" with me about the films in special rooms set apart from the classrooms.

Students were interviewed in pairs, and we sat on the floor. William Labov, who has done pioneering work in interviewing Black English speakers in New York City, has shown that the presence of

a friend in an interview makes the situation less threatening for an Informant, particularly if the Informant is a child being interviewed by an adult of a different race.[5] Each child said his name, counted from one to ten, and heard that much of the tape played back immediately. Whichever child seemed the most at ease was asked to re-tell the story of the film. In addition, I asked some questions from the Detroit Dialect Study questionnaire such as "What kind of games do you play around here?" "How do you play 'Hide and Seek'?" "What did you do on your last birthday?"etc. The questions were open-ended, and designed to elicit extended descriptions.

The tapes were transcribed in broad phonetic transcription using the International Phonetic Alphabet. The nine phonological and syntactic features were analyzed both for individual students and the group as a whole. They were tabulated using procedures adopted by Walter Wolfram in A Sociolinguistic Description of Detroit Negro Speech.[6] This insured consistency of tabulation procedures between this work and major sociolinguistic studies. It also provided a basis for comparing the findings in this work with Wolfram's findings in Detroit.

Findings

Some representative technical linguistic findings of this research are summarized in Section II of the Hand-out. The graphs reflect the kind of tabulations made for all the features.

Two striking facts emerge from this data. First, the features showed varying amounts of change in use by the students. Some changed dramatically, others little or none at all. That is, there is a definite hierarchy of degree of change in use. The features showing the most change in use were those which Wolfram characterized in the Detroit study in two ways: 1) They were sharply stratifying with respect to social class, and 2) They were highly stigmatized. In other words, the kindergarten students in Madison, as a group, showed the most change in use of socially diagnostic forms as opposed to forms which differ from standard English but are not highly stigmatized.

The four phonological features, in descending order of degree of change in use, were the -th sounds, word-final consonant clusters, post-vocalic r and syllable-final d. Only the -th feature showed substantial change in use. And only two of the three -th sound subvariables showed substantial change. These included: 1) -th appearing in the beginning of a word as in de for the, free for three, dat for that, and 2) -th occuring in the middle of a word between two vowels as in brudder for brother. In Wolfram's work, this is the only phonological feature which is sharply stratifying with respect to social class; the other three features considered in his work (and mine) show gradient stratification with respect to social class.

As in the case of the phonological features, the change in use of syntactic features showed a hierarchy in degree of change.

Third person singular suffixal -z (as in he start for he starts) showed the most change. It was followed, in descending order, by zero copula, multiple negation, pronominal apposition, and Invariant be. With the exception of pronominal apposition, the Black English forms of these features are sharply stratifying and highly stigmatized. Quantitative change in use of features across time by the kindergarten students in this study corresponds to quantitative differences across social classes in Wolfram's work. The hierarchy of degree of change in use of features reflects socially motivated linguistic change. That is, the kindergarten students systematically "reduced the distance" between their own language and school language.

The second fact established by the data (not indicated on the Hand-out) is that the students to show the most change during the year were those who began the school year using higher frequencies of Black English forms than the group as a whole. Informant 6, quoted at the beginning of this paper, for example, began the year using Black English features almost exclusively. By the end of the school year, she used standard English features the majority of the time. She showed more linguistic change for more features than any of the other students. By focusing on the kind of change and the factors apparently contributing to the change shown by Informant 6, it is possible to identify the kind of linguistic environment which nurtures second dialect acquisition.

The technical linguistic data in this study have been combined with information from teacher interviews and classroom observation

notes. That is, linguistic change is considered in its social context, namely in classrooms. These sources suggest that three factors contributed to the acquisition of standard English forms by the Black English students. These can be mentioned just briefly here. First, student sensitivity to differences between his or her own dialect and school language appears to influence the acquisition of standard dialect. Informant 6's teacher reported that Informant 6 would dictate stories which the teacher transcribed and read back to her. Informant 6 would systematically change Black English forms to standard English forms in her oral revisions. A second factor is the linguistic influence of kindergarten peers. Informant 6 regularly played with standard English speakers, both black and white. Wolfram and Christian refer to this phenomenon as the 'group reference factor' and cite it as a primary motivating factor in the acquisition of standard English.[7] Informant 6's teacher reported that Informant 6 was an excellent mimic and routinely shifted her style depending on who she was talking to. Finally, the teacher's knowledge of Black English and her acknowledgment of it as a legitimate linguistic system, appeared to be important in Informant 6's change in use of features. The teacher didn't underestimate Informant 6's language abilities because of her use of Black English features. On the contrary, she respected the child's verbal ability in her dialect as well as her ability to code switch.

These three factors, student sensitivity to language, peer pressure, and teacher attitude, all appeared to contribute to a "language climate" climate fostering standard dialect acquisition.

Conclusions

Teacher recognition of the rule-governed, systematic differences between Black English and standard English can reverse the widespread misconception that Black English feature use is "sloppy speech" or a "learning disability." Such recognition is precisely what Federal Judge Charles Joiner called for in the landmark July, 1979 court decision in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The case of Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School v. Ann Arbor School District was brought by the parents of Black children who charged that the school system failed to take into account vernacular "Black English" when teaching students to read standard English. The judge ruled that the district must advise teachers at the children's school of information on Black English, and how to use that knowledge to teach standard English.

This study suggests that the acquisition of standard English is facilitated in particular classroom settings; namely, where Black English speakers are in daily contact with a majority of standard English speakers. The hierarchy of change in feature use is a useful guide in anticipating dialect interference in learning to read. This study has documented linguistic change during one year, and will be continued in subsequent studies with the same students in 3rd, 6th, and 9th grades. It attempts to contribute to the growing mass of linguistic data from which sound educational decisions can be made.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Glendon F. Drake, "Black English and the American Value System," Kansas Journal of Sociology, IX, 2 (Fall, 1973),p.226.

[2]The work of Hans Kurath, Raven McDavid, Lee Pederson, and Frederic Cassidy exemplify this tradition of dialect geography.

[3]William Labov, "The Logic of Non-Standard English," The Florida FL Reporter, VII (Spring/Summer 1969), 60-74, 169.

[4]Geneva Smitherman, Talkin and Testifyin, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977).

[5]Labov, ibid.

[6]Walter Wolfram, A Sociolinguistic Description of Detroit Negro Speech, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969).

[7]Walter Wolfram and Donna Christian, Appalachian Speech, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1976).

Jennifer K. Ellsworth

THE EFFECT OF KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOMS WHERE STANDARD ENGLISH IS SPOKEN ON THE SPEECH OF BLACK ENGLISH SPEAKING STUDENTS

I. FEATURES FOR ANALYSIS

Phonological Features

-th sounds

1. θ in morpheme-medial or final position. (nothing/tooth) Realized as /θ/, /f/, /t/ or /ɸ/.
2. ð and θ in word-initial position.
   the/that/then /ð/ realized as /d/
   three/thing/throw /θ/ realized as /t/.
3. ð in word-medial, intervocalic position.
   mother realized as mudder

Word final consonant cluster simplification

1. Monomorphemic clusters (st in test realized as /tɛs/
2. Bimorphemic clusters (st in missed realized as /mIs/

Post-vocalic r

Absence of r in words like sister, fire, fair.

Syllable final d

d realized as /ʔ/, /t/, or /ɸ/ in words like good, bad

Syntactic Features

Suffixal -z absence

1. 3rd person singular present tense (he sing for he sings).
2. Possessive marker (Mary book for Mary's book).
3. Plural marker (two year for two years).

Zero Copula

1. Predicate nominal (Dolores the vice-president).
2. Predicate adjective (She nice).
3. Predicate locative (He at Northwestern).
4. Verb -ing (We going Friday night).
5. Intentional future gonna (It's something you gonna have).

Multiple Negation

In following environments:

1. An indefinite adverb (I couldn't hardly pick him up).
2. An indefinite pronoun (I don't bother nobody).
3. An indefinite determiner (They didn't have no gym).

Pronominal Apposition

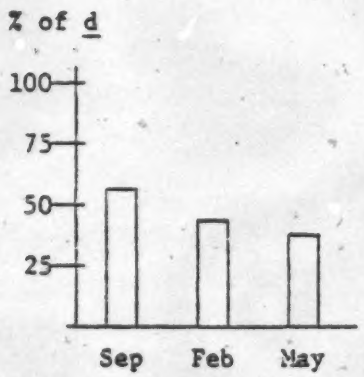
The other guy, he tried to ram the car.

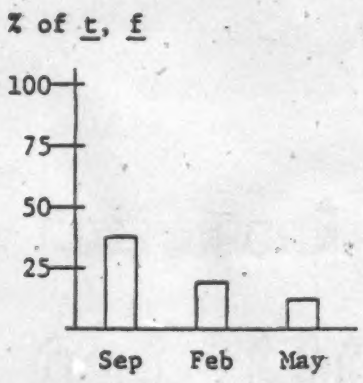
Invariant be

1. 'Habitual' (Sometime she be fighting in school).
2. Underlying will (She be in in a few minutes).
3. Underlying would (If she had that doll, she be happy).

II. DATA SUMMARY

The following is representative only. Percentages are for the group of twenty-two students as a whole. Similar tabulations were made for individual students for each feature.



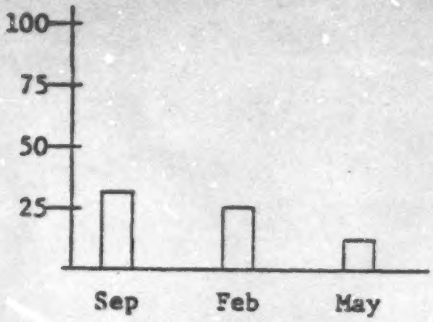


Percentage of d Realization for Word-Initial ð

September	51.2	(N=245)
February	43.2	(N=238)
May	35.0	(N=260)

Percentage of t and f Realization for Word-Initial θ

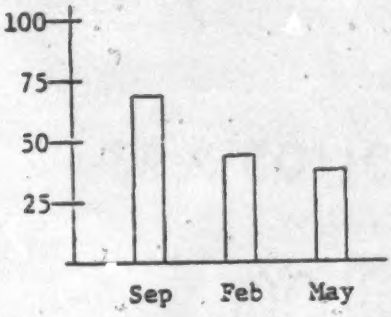
	t	f	total	
September	37.5	5.3	42.8	(N=56)
February	15.7	4.2	19.9	(N=70)
May	5.9	1.4	7.3	(N=67)



Percentage of d Realization in Word-Medial, Inter-vocalic Position

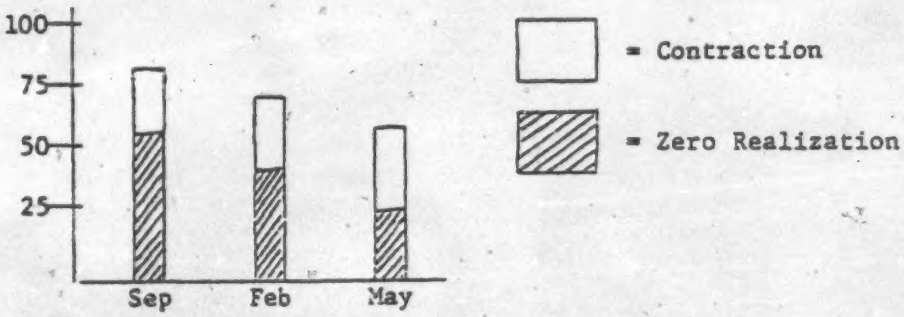
September	36.3	(N=33)
February	25.0	(N=32)
May	2.7	(N=37)

Third Person Singular -z Absence



Percentage of -z Absence

September	69.8	(N=73)
February	39.5	(N=43)
May	35.4	(N=79)



Percentage of Copula Contraction and Zero Realization

	Contraction	Zero Realization	
September	26.5	55.7	(N=79)
February	21.2	41.4	(N=94)
May	34.1	22.8	(N=79)